DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 568 CS 215 907

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TITLE Writing and Social Justice: Analyzing Representations of Homelessness in Rhetoric and Composition Courses.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; *Homeless People; *Instructional Innovation; Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism; Stereotypes; Student Reaction; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Analytical Writing; *Public Discourse; Rhetorical Structure; Social Justice; Text Factors; University of Wisconsin Milwaukee

ABSTRACT

Although the topic of homelessness receives a great deal of attention in journalism and throughout popular culture, the discourse of homelessness remains largely unexamined and unquestioned. This discourse creates stereotypes and perpetuates homelessness by portraying it as an inevitability rather than a contingency. Rhetoric and composition courses can be used to analyze the construction and effect of texts about homelessness. In a course taught at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, students were asked to do rhetorical analyses of essays from a variety of perspectives to see the range of options and to test the validity of certain positions. Readings included historical documents, sociological texts describing the current situation, articles by journalists in national publications, texts based on moral or religious prescriptions, and literary texts dealing with homelessness. Works written by homeless or formerly homeless people were also assigned. Students were also responsible for choosing reading or viewing material for certain class meetings. Students applied rhetorical analysis to the texts, identifying and evaluating the 3 Aristotelian appeals (logos, pathos, ethos), the use of claims and evidence, logical fallacies, and the author's purpose. By analyzing how this discourse represents homelessness and homeless people, students can begin to see how these texts influence individual prejudices, stereotypes, beliefs, and, in turn, laws and public policies regarding the homeless. (CR)

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This paper was written to be read aloud at the Forty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Because the paper was not originally intended for publication, please contact the author before quoting directly from this text.

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Writing and Social Justice:
Analyzing Representations of Homelessness in Rhetoric and Composition Courses

In December, 1990 I attended the Modern Language Association convention in Chicago. I had just completed my first semester of graduate school and planned on perpetuating the canon by studying, and then writing a dissertation on, an established author. At the MLA, I attended a session entitled "The Classroom and the Street." The session title and a paper by Allen Carey-Webb in particular--"Homelessness, Literature, and Pedagogy"--caught my attention because homelessness has been a particular concern of mine for as long as I can remember. (As an undergrad I had spent time volunteering in homeless shelters in Green Bay, Milwaukee, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.) Allen Carey-Webb's paper described a course he taught on international homelessness; it convinced me that I could combine my desire to teach English with my interest in homelessness and social justice. Subsequently, my academic efforts have more-often-than-not focused on analyzing representations of homelessness in American

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literature and culture.

Although the *topic* of homelessness receives a great deal of attention in journalism and throughout popular culture, the "discourse" of homelessness (to use Foucault's term) remains largely unexamined and unquestioned. I believe that this discourse creates stereotypes and perpetuates homelessness by portraying it as an inevitability, rather than a contingency. Rhetoric and composition courses, therefore, can be used to analyze the construction and effect of texts about homelessness.

This paper describes a course I taught at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee entitled "Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture: Reading and Writing about Homelessness." In the course, students were asked to do rhetorical analyses of essays from a variety of perspectives in order to see the range of opinions and to test the validity of certain positions. Writings by homeless authors were introduced to reveal previously unrecognized "voices." Writing assignments required students to reflect on their own beliefs, stereotypes, and responsibilities. In my opinion, the range of positions and texts on the subject of homelessness--that is, the discourse of homelessness--offers composition and rhetoric instructors an important and effective object of study for those who are interested in "just" teaching.

In retrospect, I was informed by several pedagogical and critical theories when I planned the course. Thus, I'm not claiming that my approach is particularly original, rather that the combination of these influences produced a meaningful and, I

hope, socially relevant course. The rest of this paper is divided into three sections: I will describe what we read, how we analyzed those texts, and finally why I think the course and others like it are productive.

When I chose the readings for the course and arranged the syllabus there were six (relatively independent) categories or types of writing I attempted to cover. During the semester, texts from popular culture such as film and television clips, children's literature, and song lyrics were also assigned and analyzed.

The first category of readings were "historical" documents intended to foreground and contextualize the current discourse of homelessness. After reading John Winthrop's essay "A Model of Christian Charity," we questioned the traditional and accepted division of classes and the role of charity in our society. Winthrop presupposes and justifies the division of classes by invoking the will of God. He states, "in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection" (31). The extent to which homelessness is a class issue became a theme throughout the course. Likewise, the influence of Benjamin Franklin's writings can be seen in the current discussions of the "deserving" and "undeserving" homeless, the insistence on "work not welfare," and in condemnations of the laziness of the homeless. In "The Way to Wealth" Franklin declares, "God helps them that help themselves" --a precursor to the currently fashionable: "Give the homeless a

hand up not a hand out." We also read the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Communist Manifesto. The later was intended to illustrate the contingency of homelessness. In other words, despite every indication in the current discourse, homelessness is contingent upon our economic and social systems; it is not an inevitability. It was somewhat difficult to impress upon students the fact that under capitalism and democracy homelessness is possible, but that under a different economic or governmental system it could be nonexistent (if only in theory).

The second category of readings consisted of sociological texts that described the current situation, the extent of the problem, the difficulties in counting and assisting the homeless, the health problems they face, the conditions in shelters, the specific problems homeless women face, and the causes of homelessness. In addition to several articles by sociologists, we read Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America by Jonathan Kozol.

Third, I assigned articles by journalists in national publications. In stark terms, these articles were conservative or liberal. The conservative articles argued that the homeless don't take jobs that are available to them; the number of homeless people is exaggerated; homeless advocates are self-serving; and it is the individual's responsibility--not the government's--to solve his or her problem. Liberal articles asserted that the "safety net" is failing; the Reagan

administration caused the current problem; affordable housing is the solution.

As a forth category, I added texts which were based on moral or religious prescriptions. We read articles from The Humanist magazine, a Christian magazine, and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy. The rhetorical strategy of these texts was to assert the moral/religious "duty" and "responsibility" we have to other, less fortunate people. I attempted to demonstrate the flexibility of "Truth" (and consequently the role of rhetoric) by asking students to identify the assumptions and assertions which were made in texts from the third and forth categories.

Fifth, we read literary texts dealing with homelessness, including William Kennedy's Ironweed, selections from Frost ("Two Tramps in Mud Time") and Hemingway ("The Battler" from In Our Time), and the "Prologue" to Ellison's Invisible Man. (Describing his invisibility, Ellison's narrator says, "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). This was one of the most significant revelations during the semester for many; they recognized how the homeless are objectified and treated as invisible as we pass them by in the streets.)

I also assigned works written by homeless or formerly

homeless people. We read an issue of Streetwise--a newspaper in Chicago sold by vendors who are homeless which includes poetry and short stories by homeless people--and Homeless Not Helpless, an anthology of work by homeless writers (Canterbury Press, 1991. Barbara Pashke & David Volpendesta, eds.).

In addition to the texts which I assigned, students were responsible for choosing the reading (or viewing) material for certain class meetings. Groups of three students chose thematically-related material for the entire class to read; the group then gave a presentation as "experts" on the topic. Topics included: international homelessness, solutions to the problem, racism and homelessness, children's literature, homelessness in Milwaukee, and films about homelessness. The ability to choose the readings and topics allowed students to make connections between the material and their own individual interests and/or to other classes. For example, three early-education majors analyzed the representations of homelessness in children's literature and proposed pedagogical applications of that literature. Students also wrote a paper at the end of the semester on a topic of their choice.

Three principles or strategies influenced the design of assignments in the course. First, I took from cultural studies the notion that anything can be read as a "text." In his Introduction to Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness (1985), Sander Gilman argues that

> All structured systems of representation, no matter

> what the medium, can be construed as "texts" for the study of stereotypes. From advertising copy to medical illustration, from popular novels to classical drama, from the academic portrait to graffiti scratched on the walls of prisons--all are texts in that they function as structured expressions of the inner world in our mental representation. (26)

Not only were students interested in the classroom use of film, television, music etc. (board games, commercials, music videos, cartoons), but, moreover, these texts were often the site of the most offensive and therefore recognizable stereotypes of the homeless. By the end of the semester, students were critiquing shows that they had seen outside of class and were indicating genuine displeasure at stereotypic treatments.

Assignments were intended to "level" texts; in other words, the medium of film was not defined as being inherently less "true" than, say, a newspaper article. Both were regarded as "rhetorical events" (i.e. texts) and therefore equally influential in constructing or reflecting our conceptions of homelessness.

Gerald Graff's notion of "teaching the conflicts" also informed my selection and use of texts. My initial impulse was to assign readings that I agreed with and assume that the class would share my opinions. By reading conservative and liberal texts side-by-side, students were able to see the <u>range</u> of positions and the ramifications of both sides. Students were

able to more clearly see how a position was conservative in contrast to the liberal position (or vice versa)--more so than if only one or the other position was presented. Moreover, the possibility of a nuanced, balanced position is increased. As Graff explains,

> This, in my experience, is the usual effect of teaching the conflicts: not that everyone becomes locked into entrenched positions (although that can happen) but that the terms of the polarization are themselves challenged and displaced by alternative ways of framing the issues. (59)

The third and most significant goal or purpose of the assignments was the application of rhetorical analysis to the texts. Students wrote several essays which analyzed the rhetoric of a given text--written or otherwise. They identified and evaluated the three Aristotelian appeals (logos, pathos, ethos), the use of claims and evidence, logical fallacies, the author's purpose etc. Although these assignments were not particularly popular, students did develop a critical vocabulary as the semester progressed.

I think it was and is valuable to address issues of social justice in rhetoric and composition courses. In addition to fostering the practical skills of writing and critical thinking, courses such as this one may do "cultural work," to borrow Jane Tompkins' term, by exposing the influence and effects of discourse. As Paul A. Bové explains,

> "Discourse" provides a privileged entry into the postmodernist mode of analysis precisely because it is the organized and regulated, as well as the regulating and constituting, functions of language that it studies: its aim is to describe the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of populations, and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought. (Lentricchia 54-55)

To borrow another term from Foucault, discourse "disciplines"--that is, it regulates both positively and negatively--our attitudes and responses to, in this case, homelessness.

Despite the surfeit of texts about homelessness in American culture, the discourse of homelessness remains largely unexamined. It seems that rhetoric and composition courses are particularly well-adapted to this task. By analyzing how this discourse represents homelessness and homeless people, we can begin to see how these texts influence our prejudices, stereotypes, beliefs and, in turn, our laws and public policies regarding the homeless.

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